

AFRICAN MUSIC WITHIN ITS SOCIAL SETTING

by

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The social setting of present day African Folk Music varies from that of the most remote tribes tucked away in the vast forests, almost oblivious of the outside world, to the homes of the towns people, some of them in the second and third generation of urban families, often of mixed tribal parentage and forming a new lower and middle class of skilled and semi-skilled industrial workers. There is a correspondingly wide range of musics to be found on the Continent from the most complex folk melodies and rhythms to the simplicities of imported dance music.

Folk music in the countryside is still by far the most widespread kind of music making in Africa, but because it is practised largely off the beaten track, it is not so well known as town and institutional musics which have been encouraged to steal the limelight. There is a remarkable variety of styles and manners of performance of folk music which ranges from the great xylophone bands of the Chopi in the South-East to the merest fragments of melody by simple folk such as the Pigmies of the Ituri Forest.

As for popular music, few authentic forms have yet arisen that have their origin in Africa alone. Many of them are, frankly, imitations of Northern and Southern American Negro dances, with local idiosyncrasies, such as we find in Accra, Lagos, Leopoldville and Johannesburg; there is a rather more advanced style of singing throughout Central Equatorial Africa that owes its initiative partly to semi-Portuguese or Brazilian styles of dancing and guitar playing, but mostly to the fact that it is much more closely associated with lively indigenous varieties. It is found all the way from Angola in the West, through the Belgian Congo, to Kenya in the East, where there are also several Arab, Indian and Swahili styles of popular music which persist especially along the coast around Mombasa.

One thing is clear to those of us who have had the opportunity of experiencing a number of African folk musics in action—that if you wish to get to the heart of an African quicker than any other way, you must be able to participate in the enjoyment of his music, and have an understanding and sympathy for his social customs.

A certain African music teacher, replying to a talk I had given on this subject, once said, referring to the Government of his Territory: "They may make new laws for us to obey, and we shall obey them; but if they tried to stop us singing, then, I promise you, there would be revolution in two days."

There can be few places left in the world, so interesting and so comparatively untouched as the African Continent, as a field for the study of folk musics and the social conditions which nurture them, in spite of the many anachronisms which are creeping in, as one would expect in this Twentieth Century. For example, a number of tribes still sing and perform their old regimental dance songs that were current when they had to defend themselves from their predatory neighbours. With no enjoyable inter-tribal wars permitted these days, a whole wealth of male songs is vanishing—No wars, no 'war dances,' no 'warriors.'

With the retreat of the wild game into protected game reserves, hunting songs are going the same way, into the few collections of folk song recorders. We recently recorded a number of "mouse-hunting" songs, sung by Sotho men and boys from Basutoland, which show perhaps the state of big game to-day in that territory.

The women's songs have not been so much affected. Women's work is still the same eternal round, particularly in the country, the domestic chores, the children's cares, the grinding and the cooking and the agriculture of the village, almost unaided by the non-fighting, non-hunting men who leave everything they can to the women.

The Africa we know to-day is by no means a single homogenous unit, and its folk musics are correspondingly diverse. African folk music, therefore, cannot properly be represented by the compositions of a single group or of a single territory, but rather by the musics of a great number of loosely related tribes, each having influenced the performances of its neighbours to a greater or lesser extent.

The more active and military tribes have frequently spread their dialects and their culture over wide areas, such as the Luba of the Southern Congo, the Nilo-Hamitic kingdoms of the great Rift Valley, and the Zulu in the South. Others less aggressive may have retained their culture in isolation for many generations.

There have been several historical reasons for this state of affairs. The interior of Africa, with its lack of great waterways or other means of communication, with its malaria and warring tribes, was one of the last great land masses to be opened up to the West; but one must remember that the people living along the coastline had had contact with the outside world for several hundred years—four hundred or more on the West coast and over nine hundred years on the East.

Two things have clearly emerged from the thousands of recordings of indigenous music which we have already made in Africa . . . on the one hand, there is a wealth of originality in musical styles throughout the Continent of an aesthetic and structural proficiency amply sufficient to act as the foundation of national musics in the future; and, on the other, there is a suicidal tendency, particularly among literate Africans, to destroy their indigenous art forms and substitute them with simpler, less aesthetic foreign styles, most of which do little or no justice to their innate musical or artistic talents. In this, they are unfortunately encouraged by many persons of simple taste, the curio collector maybe, or the earnest jazz 'missionary' (for indeed many of them are just that) who will rave over and pay good money for some commonplace repetitive trifle, and entirely fail to notice an item of outstanding merit which connoisseurs of folk craft all over the world would recognise as distinctive and mature art.

Consequently we find a paradox in African music. The un-schooled, pre-literate country folk are usually more *cultured* than their literate and educated relatives, but they have this one unfortunate quality in common, that, with few exceptions, neither is yet capable of analysing his own music away and apart from its social matrix, to the extent of being able to hand it on to the next generation as an established national art form in its own right.

The element of sympathetic magic which firmly associates a social custom with a certain style of music is still too strong, both in literates and illiterates alike for them to disassociate them from each other. Thus for the immediate future, the work of studying the structure of African folk musics will remain mostly with those outside the social environment of the native peoples, with those who can afford to associate themselves with the music of outmoded customs because the 'magic' does not affect them, and as a consequence, they are not socially ostracised by so doing. My wife and I have constantly been able to go and record in either the slum quarters of a town or the stronghold of a pagan sect where the local African teacher or preacher could not afford to be seen dead.

It must not be assumed that social change is taking place at the same pace in all quarters of the Continent. That is not so. The great majority of Africans are still living, and will continue to live a rural life with a small proportion of their families transferring themselves to urban surroundings (often too large a proportion), thus creating a class structure hitherto unknown in African society. It would appear that, given sufficient support and recognition from the administrations of each territory, and with sufficient recordings collected within the lifetime of the present generation, the spark of original African musicianship will be kept alive long enough for the literate and emerging African middle class to catch up again with their more cultured relatives and appreciate *consciously* the real worth of their folk musics, particularly as a foundation for future African compositions of worthwhile modern proportions. I do not anticipate that this will happen in our lifetime. It is perhaps too much to ask of a generation or two, which must yet be thrown into the vortex of an industrial and, in some territories, a political revolution. But, undoubtedly, they will find their feet again, whether initially by religious, intellectual or political means, we cannot foresee.

Any generalisation on the condition of African folk musics to-day must be accepted in its historical context, which presents a picture of an almost untouched Continent until the year 1500 A.D. Then, gradually, from the Sixteenth Century onwards, Arab, Portuguese, English, French, Dutch, Belgian, German and Italian emigrants have all added to the musical confusion which is loosely called "having an influence" upon the culture of the native peoples themselves.

Foreign observers have always been notoriously apt to assess the value of an African musical culture by the degree to which it fitted into their preconceived ideas of what music should sound like, or by the extent to which it would benefit themselves economically. Thus we have on the one hand, a long history of adaptations of local folk musics to new religious uses either Christian or Mohammedan, and on the other, a comparatively recent story in the commercial attack upon the musical susceptibilities of industrialised Africans by an almost exclusive accent upon the latest recorded dance craze, featuring for the most part, adaptations of American dance forms and erotic lyrics as their chief stock in trade.

At the moment, penny whistles are all the rage in the South.

The effect of outside musics will undoubtedly leave a lasting impression, for folk music everywhere is fluid and subject to social pressures. Such pressures in Africa are abnormally swift in their action because, in few places and times elsewhere has a change from isolated, tribal country life to crowded, industrial living been so accelerated. The continuity and evolution of certain styles of folk music in many parts of Africa has been almost entirely arrested and were it not for the persistence of a certain distinctive indigenous modality which colours all their urban performances, one might be led, superficially, to conclude that the man and his music had been transmogrified into something with little or no historical connection with Africa whatsoever.

The distinction between folk and popular musics in Africa would, as yet, be hard to define. Any foreign tune in their hands and mouths undergoes a subtle but instant change towards indigenous practice. Dance music, for example, imported from the Americas and elsewhere on film or disc is quickly adapted to a short four or eight bar ground with no resolution, foreign instruments are re-tuned to taste or played happily out of tune.

African musicians whose music is normally pentatonic, hexatonic or heptatonic, usually retain their

inherent modal preferences and modify any music which takes their fancy to their own innate abilities without bothering over much about being in accord with the original.

The social background of a large proportion of African men and women has changed irrevocably with the new industrial revolution particularly in the vicinity of the factories and mines; but, in spite of the upheaval in their lives, many of the social uses of folk music have survived in their new surroundings. For the music student, it is necessary first to discover the part which each kind of music plays in the life of the country people, before studying town music. He will then be able to follow the subtle process of change which occurs in the transition from rural to urban life, from rural-folk music to urban-folk music. To try to study African music the other way round, from town to country, would be most confusing.

One unfortunate effect of the social changes brought about by industrialisation has been the drawing away from the country of those craftsmen who in the past, normally made musical instruments for their own and their neighbouring villages. A large number of the simpler instruments were always made by individual players but the more complicated instruments such as the xylophones, the mibra hand pianos, and lyres and harps, and many kinds of drum were made by expert makers.

Consequently there is often nowadays a regional dearth of indigenous instruments to the detriment of these kinds of folk music which rely upon their particular accompaniments.

Research in African music must be done by people with rather exceptional talents who can tolerate the discomforts entailed in field work (and few are prepared to do so), by the rare linguists who can fully appreciate the *poetry* of a sung lyric; by the still rarer musicians who can participate in the spirit and action of African songs and dances, (and that also means an unusual degree of tolerant understanding of the working of an African society) and, perhaps, most important of all, by thoroughly discerning men and women with tape recorders who have the time, the patience and the money to discover and record as much of the representative and authentic compositions of the present day as they can find, and thus store them up against the day when African musicians, having recovered from the initial shock of Western politics, religion and industrialisation, will be ready to take stock of themselves as men in a modern world with the assurance of a national musical culture behind them which can contribute in no small measure to the great folk musics of the world and to their own pride and happiness.

Sympathetic magic which associates the nature of the music with the custom it normally accompanies is as strongly marked in the converters as in the converted, in educated and uneducated alike.

Modern African nationalism has not yet discovered its own folk music as a political propaganda force, although topical folk-songs and popular songs alike reflect political trends as in the past.

Africa as a whole (that is, South of the Sahara) lacks both the students and the funds to make an effective stand against the sudden break in musical continuity which is bound to come in many parts of the Continent, but the change will, no doubt, be sufficiently gradual in others not to lose all touch with its historical background and with the composers and musicians of the past—hence the urgent need for tape recordings *now* before it is too late—*For if there are enough recordings it may never be too late.*

We, believe not only in the aesthetic value of much of the folk music of the country, but also in its ability to work for its creators, to grace important public functions and private family occasions alike; to consolidate sound public opinion; to increase the meaning of their lives; to create a deal of happiness whatever social pressures may change the cultural face of this Continent in years to come. In other words . . . African folk musics are undoubtedly an active force in these modern times and an excellent example of a living, evolving art which is still closely allied to the social settings and the way of life of the many African peoples from whom it springs.